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ABSTRACT

When people talk about themselves, psychologists have noted that their verbal reports can be categorized as simple factual communications about the self, i.e., self-disclosure, or as ways to instruct others about how one is to be regarded, i.e., self-presentation. Responses to items on objective self-report measures of personality similarly can be regarded as self-disclosure or as self-presentations. In order to investigate whether objective self-report measures of personality are regarded better as sources of factual information about the self or as ways to instruct others about how one is to be regarded, self-disclosure and self-presentation were compared by testing the unique, divergent predictions each made about the kinds of personality variables associated with consistency in self-description. For three groups of subjects (155 normal adults, 69 murderers, and 47 college students) almost all of the self-presentation variables were correlated significantly with consistency, while none of the self-disclosure variables was correlated with consistency. Results tended to support a self-presentation view of test-taking over a self-disclosure view. (Author)

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Personality Tests: Self-Disclosures or Self-Presentations?

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Abstract

This study investigates whether objective self-report measures of personality are better regarded as sources of factual information about the self (i.e., as self-disclosures), or as ways to instruct others about how one is to be regarded (i.e., as self-presentations). The two perspectives were compared by testing the unique, divergent predictions each made about the kinds of personality variables associated with consistency in self-description. For three groups of subjects (155 normal adults, 69 murderers, and 47 college students) almost all of the "self-presentation variables" were correlated significantly with consistency, while none of the "self-disclosure variables" was correlated with the criterion. Limitations of the study are discussed.

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Psychologists have noted that when people talk about themselves--either in the laboratory or in everyday life--their verbal reports can be conceptualized as simple factual communications about the self (i.e., self-disclosure) or as ways to instruct others about how one is to be regarded (i.e., self-presentation). The distinction between self-disclosure and self-presentation has been a common topic of concern to social psychologists, personologists, and clinicians (cf. Shaver, 1977, pp. 330-339; Snyder & Swann, 1976; Wylie, 1974, pp. 63-86).

Responses to items on objective self-report measures of personality similarly can be regarded as self-disclosures or self-presentations. A self-disclosure view of item response dynamics would hold that endorsement of a personality item such as "I read 15 books a year" is simply a factual communication about the self (i.e., how many books one reads). From a self-presentational view, endorsement of that item is not merely a description of one's behavior, but a social act itself, intended to instruct others about how one is to be regarded--in this case, perhaps as an intellectual, scholarly individual.

The present research examines the adequacy of the self-disclosure and self-presentational theories of item response dynamics. Each "theory" makes implicit assumptions about why personality scale scores are associated with various non-test criteria; these implicit assumptions have implications for maximizing the validity of personality tests. The first task is to make explicit these theories of item response dynamics and test validity.

The self-disclosure view of item response dynamics hypothesizes that item responses are best conceptualized as veridical reports about one's behavior or personality. Scores on personality scales are said to predict

other behavior because (a) highly frequent behavior (reported on the scale) is bound to occur again or (b) the scale has measured some underlying trait that has directed past behavior and will direct future behavior. In both cases, the emphasis is on obtaining veridical, factual information about the self as a reference for predicting other behavior. It follows that any conditions that would encourage the subject to lie or in some way misrepresent him/herself would detract from test validity. Consequently, variables like subject honesty and cooperativeness are expected to affect the validity of self-reports.

The self-presentation view of item response dynamics hypothesizes that item responses are best conceptualized, not as descriptions of "the way one really is," but, rather, the way one would like to be regarded. One form of the self-presentation view is implicated in the research on social desirability. Researchers in this tradition claim that people will answer personality items such that they will be regarded in a favorable light, regardless of the item content. Subsequent research showed that this claim was simply false, or at least too simplistic. People do respond to item content, not just the social desirability of the item (Rorer, 1965; Block, 1965).

A more developed self-presentational view (e.g., Taylor, Carithers & Coyne, 1976; Mills & Hogan, 1978) hypothesizes that people have an image of the way they would like to appear to others (e.g., as a conscientious, conservative banker or a creative, uninhibited artist), and that they evaluate the content of personality items for the item's ability to convey aspects of their self-image. Scores on personality scales predict future behavior, it is assumed, because (a) test-taking is a form of self-presentational behavior similar to what goes on in everyday social interaction, and (b) people are

fairly consistent in their habitual self-presentational strategies. Consequently, variables such as clarity of self-image and social role-playing skills are expected to affect the validity of self-reports.

The two views--self-disclosure and self-presentation--are not completely mutually exclusive, of course. Self-presentation may entail giving factual information about one's self; however, it may involve providing false information to project a desired public self-image. The self-disclosure perspective, on ther other hand, conceptualizes item responses as veridical information about the self without regard for their potential for projecting public self-images. The self-presentation view therefore incorporates the self-disclosure perspective, but goes beyond it.

Despite some overlap, the two viewpoints are nonetheless unique enough to generate different propositions about the factors influencing the validity of personality scales. The self-disclosure view holds that honesty and cooperativeness will moderate test validity; the self-presentation view states that variables such as clarity of self-image and social skills will moderate test validity.

The present study operationalizes test validity as consistency in self-description and operationalizes the two sets of moderator variables proposed by each item response theory with several well-validated personality scales, described in the methods section. Positive correlations between consistency and the proposed moderator variables will support the respective theories; lack of correlations will undermine them.

Method

Subjects and Instrumentation

The study used protocols from three separate groups. The first group

consisted of 155 normal adults. The second group contained 69 murderers serving time at the Maryland State Penitentiary. The third group consisted of 47 students from the Johns Hopkins University. All subjects had completed the personality scales described here as a part of previous investigations. The present study merely reanalyzed the data that was on file.

The first two groups had completed the California Psychological Inventory (CPI; Gough, 1975). The third group had completed the Philosophies of Human Nature (PHN) Scale (Wrightsman, 1974) and the Adjective Check List (ACL; Gough & Heilbrun, 1965).

Rationale and Methods of Analyses

The criterion of validity for the first two groups was the consistency of responding to items on the CPI. The CPI contains 12 items that appear twice on the inventory; each subject was assigned a response consistency score based on the number of times a consistent response was given (either True on both occasions or False on both occasions).

Response consistency was chosen as a criterion for several reasons. First, it is a variable that could be scored easily from existing data. As such, attempts to replicate can be performed by any researcher with archival CPI data. Naturally, the simple analyses described here should be regarded as initial steps toward examining moderating effects on more complex criteria.

Second, the consistency of behavior is an issue that has drawn an enormous amount of attention recently (cf. Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Epstein, 1979). Rather than take one of the extreme positions--that people are totally consistent or inconsistent--studies such as the present one attempt to show that certain personality variables moderate the amount of behavioral consistency a person will exhibit.

Finally, the self-disclosure and self-presentation views make clear, divergent predictions about the variables theoretically associated with response consistency. From the perspective of self-disclosure, inconsistency in self-description is a function of impulsivity, delinquency, or behavioral lability. These tendencies were assessed with the Responsibility, Socialization, Self-Control, and Flexibility scales of the CPI. From the self-presentation view of test-taking, inconsistency is a function of poor identity and social incompetence. The CPI scales that best cover these variables are Dominance, Sociability, Social Presence, Self-Acceptance, Communality, and--a scale developed by Hogan (1969)--Empathy.

To insure that any results from the group of normal adults and the group of murderers was not an artifact of the instrumentation, two different instruments were used for the student group. For this group, the PHN Scale was used to measure response consistency. This 84-item scale is not as long as the 480-item CPI, and it does not contain duplicate items. It does, however, contain item pairs that are near semantic paraphrases or opposites. Six such paraphrases and ten such opposites were chosen to define a consistency scale. Here, consistency was defined as responding in the same direction to a paraphrase pair and in opposite directions for an opposite pair.

The personality scales used for this third group were chosen from the Adjective Check List. The self-disclosure view predicts that the Self-Control, Order, Lability, and Change scales on the ACL moderate response consistency. (These variables are the ACL scales that correlate the highest with the CPI variables used for the first two groups.) The self-presentation view holds that the ACL scales Self-Confidence, Achievement, Dominance, and Exhibition

best predict response consistency. (Again, among all ACL variables, these correlate the highest with the CPI variables used for the first two groups.) Thus, this third subject sample represents an attempt at conceptual replication of what is found using the first two groups.

Results

The pattern of correlation coefficients, shown in Table 1, clearly demonstrates that the "self-presentation variables" account for more variance in response consistency than do the "self-disclosure variables." Of the 16 correlations between the self-presentation variables and consistency, all are in the predicted direction, and 14 of the 16 are statistically significant. In contrast, of the 12 correlations between the self-disclosure variables and consistency, five are in the wrong direction, and none reached statistical significance.

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Insert Table 1 here

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Discussion

Although the results of the present study overwhelmingly support a self-presentation view of test-taking over a self-disclosure view, there are several limitations of the study that should be mentioned. First, these results may not obtain with different tests and different behavioral criteria. This question can be addressed only by additional conceptual replications. Especially valuable would be a study using observer ratings of the personality moderator variables, which would avoid some possible confounding in the present study.

Second, this sort of study ignores individual differences in test-taking strategies. It is possible that some subjects are chronic self-disclosers,

while others tend to be Goffmanesque self-presenters (i.e., they resemble Snyder's (1974) high self-monitoring type).

Finally, this study does not take into account test-taking conditions. It is possible that certain conditions (e.g., anonymity, mutual self-disclosure--cf. Jourard, 1964) would encourage subjects to self-disclose, while other conditions (competing for a job) would encourage self-presentation and impression management.

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Table 1

Personality Correlates of Item Response Consistency

	Group		
	I	II	III
	155 Normal Adults	69 Murderers	47 Students
Self-Disclosure Variables			
California Psychological Inventory			
Responsibility	.08	.03	
Socialization	.08	-.18	
Self-Control	-.05	-.10	
Flexibility[a]	.02	.11	
Adjective Check List			
Self-Control			-.08
Lability[a]			.02
Order			.11
Change[a]			-.14
Self-Presentation Variables			
California Psychological Inventory			
Dominance	.21***	.20**	
Sociability	.12*	.27***	
Social Presence	.07	.39***	
Self-Acceptance	.21***	.38***	
Communality	.28***	.75***	
Empathy	.20**	.14*	
Adjective Check List			
Self-Confidence			.22*
Dominance			.21*
Achievement			.21*
Exhibition			.15

Note. Consistency for Groups I and II is measured with the California Psychological Inventory; for Group III with the Philosophies of Human Nature Scale.

[a]Direction of scoring reversed.

* $p < .10$

** $p < .05$

*** $p < .01$ (All one-tail tests).